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Boerne High teacher to join scientists on Antarctica excursion

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(Helen L. Montoya/Express-News)

Boerne High School science teacher Sarah Anderson prepares her classroom for the new school year. She'll be with her new students one day before she leaves on a study expedition to the Amundsen Sea in a part of Antarctica that hasn't been visited in more than a century.

Sarah Anderson will tell you she is much more of a sun worshipper than a snow bunny.

Next week, though, the Boerne High School science teacher will pack a suitcase full of fleece sweat shirts and depart for one of the coldest places on the planet — Antarctica — where she's to spend two months living aboard a ship with scientists who are probing the secrets of an icy sea that humans seldom visit.

Anderson will accompany five researchers from the University of Texas at San Antonio on an expedition to the Amundsen Sea.

That wild and inaccessible area on the bottom of the world is a place where scientists want to study the ecology and the impact of global warming.

The trip is sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States (ARCUS), which also fund programs to let

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classroom teachers accompany scientists to these remote locations.

"It is an amazing opportunity," said Anderson, a 21-year classroom veteran who teaches physics and aquatic science. "There are so many things around for science teachers for professional development and for my kids."

More coverage

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Some months ago, UTSA Professor Stephen Ackley offered Boerne schools the chance to send a teacher with him on the upcoming expedition he is taking with four other UTSA faculty and students. Anderson applied through her school and was accepted.

Ackley is an expert in sea ice and the clues it gives about global climate change. Anderson and the UTSA team will be among 22 scientists from various institutions living aboard the icebreaker from early September until early November, as the Southern Hemisphere moves from winter into spring.

Their destination is the Amundsen Sea, a remote stretch of Antarctica, named in honor of one of the explorers who survived a treacherous winter voyage to that destination in 1899. That was the last time humans sailed this deep into the sea during the winter, when ice still is tightly packed and frozen full of secrets. Ackley said scientists on the trip want to understand how the ice forms, moves and decays.

Thick ice sheets at the poles are part of the global cooling system and play a role in shielding the Earth from harmful space radiation. But these ice sheets are showing signs of change; in the Arctic, the sheets are visibly thinning, and in the Antarctic, scientists are seeing changes in wildlife habitat.

The UTSA crew will be deploying buoys and floats with remote sensing equipment that will collect data after humans leave, sampling things like air and water temperature, ice composition and depth.

"Understanding how the ice cover interacts with the environment in a variety of different ways is our goal," Ackley said.

Anderson already has been briefed on her assignments, which will include helping with deployment of buoys, collecting ice cores and collecting observations.

"I'm really part of the team," she said. "They expect me to pull my weight."

In her off-duty hours, she'll maintain a blog with pictures that will transmit lessons to her students back home. There also will be occasional ship-to-shore phone calls to connect Anderson with her students in Boerne.

She'll leave San Antonio on Tuesday for Punta Arenas, Chile, the port from which the team will depart Sept. 1. Before she goes, though, she's got to get her classroom ready to leave in the hands of a substitute. She'll be on campus exactly one day; most of her students still don't know she's about to leave them.

"I'll be teaching one day," she said, laughing. "It will be, 'HiBye' and I will be off."

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